

# Care Leavers

# Handbook



West Berkshire  
COUNCIL



**What this guide**

**contains**

## What this guide contains

### Welcome to West Berks Care Leavers Handbook

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**With thanks to  
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Care Leaver Champions  
for their input into the  
design of this booklet**

# Welcome to West Berks

## care leavers' handbook



Leaving care can be a challenging, as well as an exciting time; it's important you get the help and support necessary to make sure you know what happens next, to know who will help you and exactly what you are entitled to.

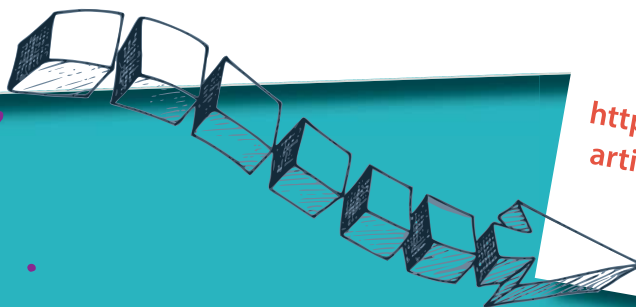
This handbook has been developed with West Berks care leavers to help you navigate your way through the big transitions in your life as you move into adulthood.

We hope that it will give you guidance to help any questions you may have about leaving care by providing you with information on the practical help you will get with accommodation, education, training and employment, money matters, health and other life skills needed as you prepare for independence. It will also point you in the right direction for advice and support outside of the council as well as how you can make sure you are listened to and have a say in what happens.

Leaving care can be a challenging as well as an exciting time



More information can be found on our website for looked after children and care leavers at <http://info.westberks.gov.uk/article/34609/Looked-After-Children-Service>



# 1. The legal stuff:

## Who are care leavers

The law defines four categories of care leavers and the help and support you get will depend on where you are in your journey leaving care. There are 4 key words you need to look out for:

**'Eligible'** young people are 16 or 17 years old who are still looked after (in care) and were looked after for at least 13 weeks since the age of 14.

**'Relevant'** young people are 16 or 17 years old who are no longer looked after, but were looked after for at least 13 weeks since the age of 14.

**'Former Relevant'** young people are 18-21 year olds who were previously an 'eligible' or 'relevant' child. You can continue to be a former relevant young person up to the age of 25 if you are continuing on an education or training course.

**'Qualifying'** young people are aged between 16-21 and were looked after on or after their 16th birthday and are no longer looked after, but had spent less than 13 weeks being looked after since the age of 14.

Additionally and importantly, you can approach us at any time for advice and support at any time up to the age of 25 if you were in care as a child.



## 2. So, I'm a care leaver -

### what are my entitlements?



#### You can expect the following:

Involvement in the decisions that will affect your future – you will be provided with the information and support required to help you make informed decisions about where you are going to live in the future, what you are going to do and how you are going to support yourself.

This means we will:

- Allocate a **personal advisor** (see Section 3 for more information)
- Support you to develop a **pathway plan** (see Section 4 for more information)
- Support you to find somewhere **suitable to live** (see Section 5 for more information)
- Offer you **financial support** (see Section 6 for more information)
- Support you with **education, training and employment** (see Section 7 for more information)
- Help you stay **fit and healthy** (see Section 8 for more information)
- Ensure we **listen to you** and know what to do if you are not happy about something (see Section 9 for more information)
- Help you with **contact with your family** – if you want to and it is safe for you to do so.
- Give you **access to your files** – when you are 18 you can ask to see your children's services' files. These will be edited because we can only share the things about you and not somebody else. Sometimes, this can be a very emotional and difficult process and we advise you not to do it on your own. Your personal advisor can help you with this.



# 3. Your support team

West Berks 16+ and Care Leavers Team is here to help support you as you learn to live more independently.

We can help you:

- Make plans for the future
- Have somewhere safe and secure to live
- Keep yourself fit and healthy and feel good about yourself
- Make sure that you have enough money to live on
- Support you to budget your finances
- Stay in education for as long as you can
- Find the training course or career that you really want
- Stay in touch with people who are important to you
- Deal with difficulties and negotiate solutions to problems
- Find out about your rights

When you reach 18 we will decide with you who is the best person to be your personal advisor, this will normally be your social worker but it might be someone else who is important in your life. When you reach 18 you will stop having a social worker but will have a personal advisor. Your personal advisor will:

- Support you in looking after health, including arranging regular health assessments and dental checks and making sure that you have all the immunisations that you need
- Encourage and support you in going as far as you can with your education
  - Make sure you receive advice and guidance with jobs, careers and training
  - Help you to develop the skills and knowledge that you need to live independently
  - Help you to stay in touch with your family
- Support you find somewhere suitable to live

For over 18 only your personal advisor will:

- Listen to your views and ideas about your life and help you to use these to inform your Pathway Plan
- Work with you and your carers and others to put your Pathway Plan into practice
- Attend your looked after review meeting every 6 months whilst you are still in care
- Organise a Pathway Plan review every 6 months after you have left care



# 4. Pathway Planning

Your Pathway Plan will set out your plans for the future. This is your document and your views and aspirations must be at the centre of it!

**As you approach 16 your social worker will work with you to complete a needs assessment report setting out your abilities, your achievements and your needs now and in the future. You will then work together to create your Pathway Plan, which will set out how you will be supported to achieve the things that you want for yourself in your life, and who is going to provide the help you need.**

It will be important that your Pathway Plan accurately sets out what is important to you, and what you want to achieve in the future. In order to do this your social worker/personal advisor will also talk with your parents or carers and other important people in your life – and you should tell them who the important people are.

**The Pathway Plan will need to grow and change as you approach adulthood and as your situation changes. When you reach 18 you will no longer be looked after but your personal advisor will continue to meet with you and work on your Pathway Plan to ensure plans are put in place to support you even when you are a young adult.**

Your Pathway Plan is a 'live' document and you will continue to have reviews every 6 months to add to or revise the Plan as your aspirations develop and change. Your social worker will continue to meet with you and review the Pathway Plan. Most of you will stay in care after you reach 16 and will continue to have looked after reviews chaired by an Independent Reviewing Officer. The Pathway Plan will replace the Care Plan and this will be reviewed at your Statutory Looked After Review. If there are parts of your Pathway Plan that you do not want shared at a review, you can agree with your social worker what doesn't need to be discussed.

## 5. Where will

I live?

One of the most important decisions we have to agree with you as a Care Leaver is where you are going to live. It is very important that wherever you live, it is the right move for you and that we plan ahead to make sure we find the right place for you. Your social worker/ personal advisor is there to help you with this, working through the options available to you and helping you to decide on what will be best for you at that time. All plans for your accommodation will need to be included in your Pathway Plan and agreed at your reviews.

In addition, there is a fortnightly meeting that looks at placements and accommodation for looked after children and care leavers. This meeting ensures that any decisions about where you live is the right decision for you and agrees the funding for the placement or accommodation. Your social worker / personal advisor will keep you informed of the process and any agreements made.

All plans for your accommodation will need to be included in your Pathway Plan



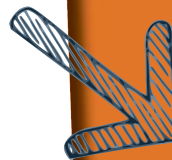
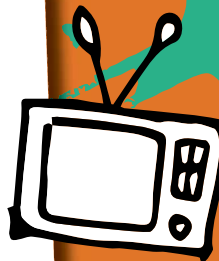
Whilst you are 16 or 17 we want you live with a foster carer or in residential care but it is really important that we plan for where you will live when you are 18 and ensure we work with you and your carers to prepare you for this.

If you are in a foster placement and want to stay there after you reach 18, as long as both you and the foster carer are in agreement, and you are engaged in education, training or employment, then we will support you to remain there. Sometimes it is the right thing for you to live a bit more independently, when this is agreed we will always work very hard to ensure wherever you live is appropriate for you and that you have all the supports you need.



The accommodation options for 18 year olds include:

- **Staying put** – this is where you stay in your foster placement and we can agree this as long as you stay in education, training or are working
- **Supported accommodation** – perhaps a shared house or flat, where you have your own room but share some facilities with other young people and receive support from a housing support officer.
- **Foyers and other supported housing**
- **Specialist accommodation**
- **Independent accommodation** – private rented
- **Your family**



### Preparing for independence

Moving to live on your own is a massive step, it's not just about paying bills and cooking your own food; it's also about staying healthy and getting on with your neighbours! We work closely with our Young People's Service in working with you to learn the skills you need to succeed in your new accommodation and preparing you for independence.



We also expect your foster carers or residential care worker to help you learn independent skills and this should be included in the discussions at your looked after review. Your social worker/personal advisor will talk to you as part of the pathway planning process. When you reach 18 we offer you the choice to have up to another three reviews chaired by your IRO to help ensure you are settling into adult life and receiving all the support you need.





## 6. Money matters

There are several different sources of money you are entitled to as a Care Leaver, but the amounts will vary depending on your circumstances and legal status. Other factors that may affect payments made to you will include the type of accommodation you live in and whether you are engaged in employment, education or training.

**Any financial support will be set out clearly in your Pathway Plan.**



### Financial support for 16 and 17 year olds

If you are not working, entitled to benefits or receiving any other form of income, and you are not living in foster or residential care, you will receive the following payments: At this age you will not be able to claim benefits (with the exception of young parents and disabled young people), so we will be responsible for paying for your accommodation and living costs.

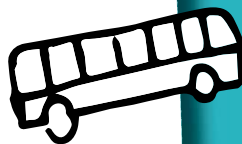
- Living allowance
- Accommodation costs
- Birthday allowance – on your 16th and 17th birthdays
- Festival allowance – for one festival which you will nominate
- Travel to/from college
- College registration and administration fee

**In addition to the basic living payments listed, there are also discretionary payments**

In addition to the basic living payments listed, there are also discretionary payments which can be agreed with the Leaving Care Manager, and included in your Pathway Plan. These include

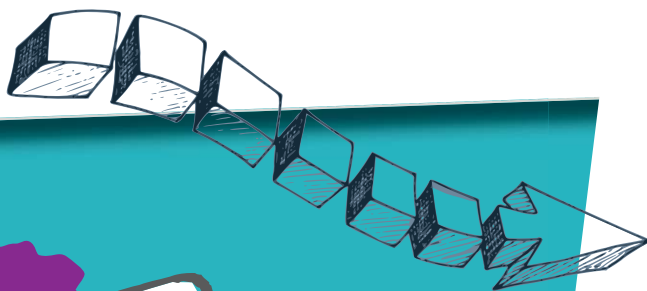
- Dental treatment – for NHS treatment
- Glasses – for frames only (lenses should be free on NHS)
- Phone cards/mobile phone
- Passport, travel document applications
- Educational materials/special equipment
- Costs associated with special needs
- Activities and Leisure – this is for hobbies, holidays, leisure and related activities e.g. gym costs and driving lessons
- Free gym membership
- Maternity payment
- Travel to family time
- Clothing allowance

To see the current amounts paid to 16 and 17 year olds for the things above go to [www.westberks.gov.uk](http://www.westberks.gov.uk) and look under the care leavers tab.



## Financial support for 18+ year olds

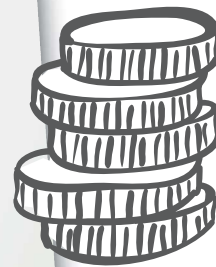
Although you may still receive some financial support once you turn 18, you will be expected to get your income from work, education grants and, if eligible, benefits. In most instances we will not be responsible for your daily living costs. We will continue to Pathway Plan with you to help you develop in your chosen career and to gain meaningful employment and aim high in your aspirations.



## Benefits claims

If you are continuing in education or actively seeking employment your personal advisor or support worker will help you with your initial claim, or we can request a specialist welfare rights advisors who can help you with your applications. You will need identification documents and a bank account (if you don't already have one) for the benefits to be paid into. Your social worker/personal advisor will help you to get these in place before your 18th birthday, and support you to apply for your benefits before your birthday so that everything is set up to reduce any delays in payments.

Newbury Jobcentre Plus has made it easier for care leavers to claim benefits. However, you will need to inform them you are a care leaver so that they can provide extra support. The benefits you can claim will depend on your circumstances and it can be complicated. The Citizens Advice Bureau have a website that can help [www.adviceguide.org.uk](http://www.adviceguide.org.uk) and full benefit details can be found at [www.gov.uk/browse/benefits](http://www.gov.uk/browse/benefits).



## If you are 18 or over you can get Universal Credit

If you are unemployed, available for and actively seeking work, working less than 16 hours per week on average. You need to show that you have actively looked for work and be available to go to job interviews, or attend appointments at short notice. To get Universal Credit you must go to a Jobcentre (usually every 2 weeks or when asked) to show how you've been searching for a job – this is known as 'signing on'; or If your college course is part time you will be entitled to Universal Credit, but you will also need to make yourself available for work.

Please note: young people who do not undertake the supporting actions required for Universal Credit, miss appointment, leave a job without a good reason, or are dismissed may be subject to a Benefit Sanction.

In order to avoid this, your personal advisor can help with your job search, appointments at the Jobcentre, and fulfilling other commitments.



## Housing benefit and income support

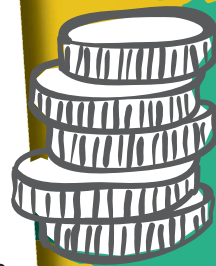
If you are over 18, living away from your family and are studying full-time in non-advanced education (up to and including A Level or equivalent), you can claim Income Support and Housing benefit. You can enrol in your course of study at any time up to your 21st birthday, and can continue to receive these benefits up to the end of your studies or the end of the academic year in which you become 21, whichever is earlier. This help is also available to you if you have stayed on with your former foster carers.

**Housing Benefit** can pay for all or part of your rent. If you are likely to have problems paying your full rent, you can approach the council and ask for Discretionary Housing Payments. These are not guaranteed, but the council may be able to help you for a period of time until you find other accommodation or earn enough to pay your rent yourself.

**Universal Credit** – if you are in full time employment, or are in college or university and are studying full time, you should claim universal credit until you are 20 years old. This will be dependent on the hours and type of course you are studying.

### How can I claim?

If you are not claiming any state benefit, contact the local council where you live to claim Housing Benefit. If you do claim a benefit through JobCentre Plus, they will take details of your Housing Benefit claim at the same time and pass this on to the council.



## Setting up home allowance (previously known as Leaving Care Grant)

We will provide financial support to care leavers moving into independent living arrangements for you to buy the essentials required for your new home (see the children in care website or ask your social worker/personal advisor for the current amount). You may be able to access some of your allowance when you move into semi-independent living if the unit does not provide everything you need.



## Discretionary payments to 18-25 year olds

As with 16 and 17 year olds, there are also discretionary payments which can be agreed with the Leaving Care Managers, and included in your Pathway Plan for 18 to 25 year olds. These include:

- Travel fares to/from college
- Costs in relation to equipment to undertake vocational training or education



## Financial support for former relevant young people in higher education (university)

If you are a Former Relevant young person who is in Higher Education, you are entitled to education equipment and living costs support (see the children in care website or ask your personal advisor for the current amounts).

You are entitled to student loans and grants, and usually will not be able to claim benefits. Student loans and maintenance grants are administered by Student Finance, and you do not need to repay maintenance grants.

You should also get a Higher Education Bursary and qualify for 20 weeks accommodation during vacation periods. We will meet the costs of your vacation accommodation.

There are also many bursaries to encourage young people from disadvantaged backgrounds to go to university, including care leavers. The Who Cares? Trust produces a higher education handbook giving an overview of different universities' support to care leavers. More information is available on their website: [www.thewhocarestrust.org.uk](http://www.thewhocarestrust.org.uk)

To see the current amounts paid to 18 to 25 year olds for the things above go to [www.westberks.gov.uk](http://www.westberks.gov.uk) and look under the care leavers tab.

## Disabled or ill care leavers

As a care leaver who is disabled or ill, you may be able to claim certain benefits when you are 16 and 17:

- **Employment and Support Allowance (ESA)** – a benefit for sick or disabled people who cannot work. To get ESA you would normally have to have an assessment to see if you can work. You will also need to have a medical certificate (called a 'fit note') from your GP showing why you can't work, or have a condition that exempts you from the medical assessment.
- **Personal Independence Payment (PIP)** – helps with some of the extra costs caused by long-term ill health or disability, if you are aged 16 or over.

## Care leavers who are parents

If you are 16 or 17, and are expecting or responsible for a child, you could be entitled to income support for the baby. This can be claimed from 11 weeks before the due birth date if you are not in school or college. If you are in school or college you will have to wait until the baby is born to make your claim.

If you are still in care and your child is living with you (even if your child is also in care), you can claim **child benefit**. This is a tax-free payment that you can claim for your child



# 7. Education, training

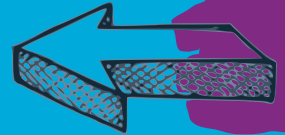
## and employment



If you want to get on in life this is perhaps the most important thing we can help you with. We encourage you to make education a top priority and we will support you to stay in education for as long as you need and want to. This does not mean staying in school necessarily as there are a number of different options, whether that is going to college, starting an apprenticeship, going to university, or if you want to, finding a job.

We have specialist workers who can help you explore your options and help you make applications and support you once you start education or work. We will support you practically and financially as set out above. The ways we will support you will be agreed in your Pathway Plan.

We also have an apprenticeship scheme at the council which you could apply to and it might even lead to a permanent position at the council!



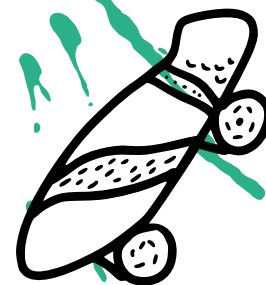
**We will support you practically and financially**

## 8. Staying fit and healthy

A big part of staying healthy is eating a healthy diet and getting plenty of exercise. Occasionally you may become poorly or need some advice about a health issue.

There is a designated nurse for looked after children in West Berks who can help with:

- Advice on health promotion services
- Stopping smoking, drug and alcohol misuse, genito urinary medicine (GUM), contraception and counselling
- Health appointments at a venue suitable for you (at home, a health clinic or over the telephone)
- Finding someone for you to talk to when you are feeling down or if you need some specialist help with your mood or mental health



**In addition to the basic living payments listed, there are also discretionary payments**

When you leave care your personal adviser will help you to register with a GP and dentist if necessary. You will then be responsible for your own health e.g. eating healthy, exercising, getting plenty of sleep. It is also important that you know when and how to seek help or advice from professionals if you are feeling unwell or are worried in any way about your health.

After 18, you may still be able to receive free prescriptions, glasses and dentist treatment if you are still in full time education or claiming benefits. Your health provider will be able to help you find out if you are eligible.

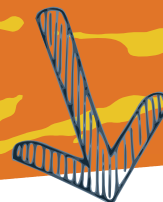
We will give you a free gym pass up to the age of 21.

## 9. Having your say

The **Children in Care Council** provides children and young people with opportunities to have a say on the issues that matter to them as a looked after child and to be heard by the people who make decisions about their lives.

Being a part of West Berks Children in Care Council is a fantastic opportunity to influence real changes to the services and support that all of West Berks looked after children and young people receive. It enables children and young people to express their views, make suggestions directly to senior managers and the Corporate Parenting Panel as well as meet new people and get involved in exciting activities.

To find out more go to [www.westberks.gov.uk](http://www.westberks.gov.uk)



**Advocacy.** If you sometimes find it difficult to say what you want or would like someone to help represent your views we will provide an advocate who will help you if you are under 18. If you are over 18 we will be able to point you in the right direction if we can't provide an advocate ourselves.

The advocate will be someone independent of the council and will be there to ensure you are listened to and might come with you to meetings to help you get your view across.

Complaints and compliments. If you want to make any type of comment about your care or the services you have received you can contact us by email at [letusknow@westberks.gov.uk](mailto:letusknow@westberks.gov.uk) or by calling or texting 07810 790580. Alternatively you can just tell your social worker, Personal adviser or carer that you want to make a comment or complaint. We guarantee we will listen to what you've said, look into it properly and respond to you in a reasonable timescale.

Being a part of West Berks Children in Care Council is a fantastic opportunity to influence real changes

## 10. Useful websites,

### numbers and contacts

#### National resources for young people and care leavers

**Coram Voice:** A charity for care leavers dedicated to empowering young people.

[www.coramvoice.org.uk](http://www.coramvoice.org.uk)

**Catch-22:** An organisation that helps young people turn their lives around, including care leavers

[www.catch-22.org.uk](http://www.catch-22.org.uk)

**NSPCC:** A charity aimed at ending child abuse.

[www.nspcc.org.uk](http://www.nspcc.org.uk)



**Childline:** A 24 hour counselling service for children and young people. Tel: **0800 1111**

[www.childline.org.uk](http://www.childline.org.uk)

**Bullying UK:** Bullying/keeping safe on the internet. Tel: **0808 800 2222**

[www.bullying.co.uk](http://www.bullying.co.uk)

**Refugee Council** – Asylum Seekers

[www.refugeecouncil.org.uk](http://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk)

**Reading Refugee Support Group**

[www.rrsg.org.uk](http://www.rrsg.org.uk)



**Shelter:** the housing and homelessness charity. Tel: **0800 800 4444**

[www.shelter.org.uk](http://www.shelter.org.uk)



# Useful websites,

# numbers and contacts

## Rape, sexual violence and domestic abuse

If you are affected by these issues you can go to:

### Domestic violence

**Womens Aid** – 24 hour advice line for women affected by domestic abuse. Tel: **0808 200 0247**

[www.womensaid.org.uk](http://www.womensaid.org.uk)

### Mens Advice Line

For men affected by domestic violence.

Tel: **0808 801 0327**

Email: [info@mensadviceline.org.uk](mailto:info@mensadviceline.org.uk)



### LGBT

**Broken Rainbow** – for LGBT people affected by domestic violence. Tel: **0800 999 5428**

[www.brokenrainbow.org.uk](http://www.brokenrainbow.org.uk)

Email: [help@brokenrainbow.org.uk](mailto:help@brokenrainbow.org.uk)



More information and useful contacts can be found on our website specifically designed for looked after children and care leavers at [www.westberks.gov.uk](http://www.westberks.gov.uk).



